

PLAYGROUND: A STUDY OF SOME INTERACTIONS BETWEEN
CHILDREN AND TEEN-AGERS AT PLAY IN THEIR
PLAY ENVIRONMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study deals with interactions between play behavior and play environments. A large segment of the research was of a case study in Boston's South End.

Characteristics of the physical environment which seem to have a positive effect on play behavior were studied. Some were: flexibility of the environment, contact with the city, and possibility of adapting or changing the environment itself.

The major hypothesis is that a physical environment which has the above characteristics will foster relaxed, natural, spontaneous and sociable behavior. This hypothesis is tested on two study cases and seems valid.

Also studied are: play behavior is a fusion of work with play; affection; group bonds; and relationships among the players.

Additional findings are that participant observation and commitment to the kids themselves are necessary for good playground design.

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Table of contents

	page
Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Note to the reader	8
Foreword	9
Part I: Background information and statement of the problem ...	14
A: Study of four playgrounds. One afternoon's visit	15
I: Hunches	29
2: Initial observations of the four playgrounds and more elaborated hunches	35
B: More detailed observations and interviews	42
I: Concept of family	52
2: The kind of playground the players wanted to have .	58
C: Method for the above part	60
I: Observations	61
2: Interviews	62
D: Preliminary conclusions and formulation of my hypotheses	64
Part II: Statement of my hypotheses	67
A: General hypothesis: Sense of Concourse	69
I: Minor supportive hypotheses	70
B: Other general hypotheses	71
Part III: Testing	73

	page
A: Preliminary testing: Playground No. 4	75
B: Method used for further testing	77
C: Second testing: Cretone, case study	79
I: Observations and interviews	80
2: Findings and stylized model	85
D: Third testing: Mount Pleasant Street, case study	88
I: Observations and interviews	89
2: Findings	94
Part IV: Summary	95
Part V: Conclusions and implications	99

List of Figures

	page
A: Playground No. 4, as it was in the last months which preceded its abandonment	12
B: Playground No. 4 after its abandonment	13
C: Map 1: the four playgrounds on Shawmut Avenue	23
D: Playground No. 1, the vacant lot and the Puerto Rican children	24
E: Playground No. 2, the stage	25
F: Playground No. 3, the concrete forms	26
G: Playground No. 4, the benches	27
H: Playground No. 4, the slide	28
I: Views of the four playgrounds	34
J: Layout of Playground No. 4	50
K: Use map of Playground No. 4	51
L: Playground No. 4, use map of the Headquarters	56
M: The children of the family in the small yard	57
N: ... and playing with materials under the slide	57
O: The teen-agers of the family near the bench in the street court	57
P: ... and on Shawmut Avenue leaving for an excursion	57
Q: Layout of the <u>piazza</u> of Cretone	82
R: Cretone, the piazza	83
S: Cretone, the recreation room	84
T: Cretone, stylized model of the recreation room	86
U: Cretone, stylized model of the <u>piazza</u>	87

	page
V: Mount Pleasant Street	91
W: Mount Pleasant Street, the driveway	92
X: Mount Pleasant Street, the back place	93

Note:

It seemed to me sufficient, for the purpose of this report to use ordinary terms such as "youths", "players" and "kids". These terms refer to individuals ranging from the ages of 5 to 18 years.

Foreword

This study of child-teenage environments is centered around what I will call, "Playground No. 4", a playground located in Boston's South End.

The South End is one of Boston's older residential districts. Despite the present blight and the demolitions of large sections, it still retains the charm of an old-fashioned neighborhood, characterized by neat rows of four-story brick dwellings with bay windows, stoops and small front gardens which cater to the amenities of the outdoor life.

Playground No. 4 is located on a block bounded by Shawmut Avenue and Washington Street, at a point where the South End's orderly grid structure dissolves into a mixture of urban areas. In view are some housing projects, commercial and business areas, and the "combat zone" around the MBTA Dover Station. Because of breaks in the building facades that surround the playground itself, it can be reached by several alleys and short-cut routes and is thus accessible from a variety of environs.

The playground has a short history. In 1968 it was built by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (B.R.A.), the urban renewal agency of Boston. It consisted of four basketball courts, a portable swimming pool, swings and other children equipment. Following its construction, it became a successful home for a group of boys and girls, from 5 to 20 years of age. They played all day in the playground and constructed two club houses out of some vacant dwellings. Three years later, in the

spring and summer of 1971, the same agency, the B.R.A., demolished the club houses as well as the other rows of buildings which had separated the playground from Shawmut Avenue, and which had provided some measure of privacy and protection to the place.

What followed after the demolition was a rapid decay of the playground. The group of boys and girls migrated toward other parks and hangouts and the playground became a vandalized wasteland. The boys walking along Shawmut Avenue dumped stones and rubbish into the holes left by the demolished buildings and into the playground itself. Some of the pedestrians said, "It looks like a battlefield," or "Like a trouser with the zipper pulled down," meaning that the place looked exposed and without protection.

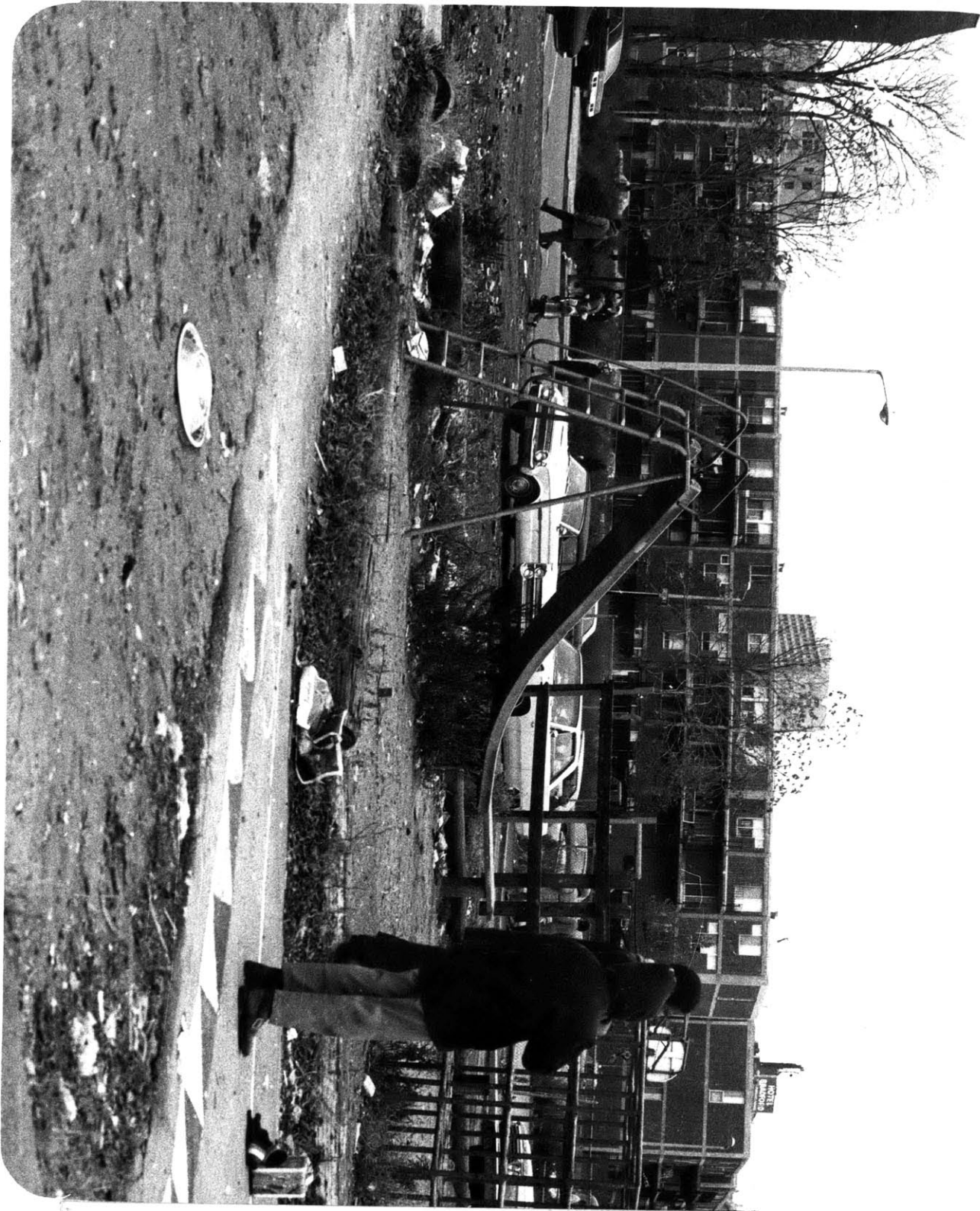
This report describes Playground No. 4, as it was in the last months which preceded its abandonment. My study is to a very large extent a comparative study. In Part I, I compare Playground No. 4 to three other playgrounds on Shawmut Avenue, pointing out the peculiarities of each. In Part III, I again compare Playground No. 4 to other play environments--a piazza in Cretone, a small village near Rome, and Mount Pleasant Street in Roxbury. The purpose of this second set of comparisons is to test some of my original findings about playgrounds.

My purpose in this study is to get at the playground users' needs by observing how people (in this case the players) interact with their play environment and how this affects their behavior. Since Playground No. 4 was to a large extent a do-it-yourself playground, that is

a playground largely manipulated by the players and adapted to their needs, it was a fertile field for this study.



A: Playground No. 4, as it was in the last months which preceeded its abandonment.



B: Playground No.4 after its abandonment.

"What followed after the demolitions was a rapid decay of the environment. Some of the pedestrians said 'It looks like a battlefield'." (p.2)

Part I:

Background information and statement of the problem

A: Study of four playgrounds. One afternoon's visit

One afternoon in September 1970, I decided to take a walk along Shawmut Avenue and to visit the South End, where I had been living for a month.

My house was located almost at the end of Shawmut Avenue, in a section of the street inhabited by a small Puerto Rican community, living in row houses on both sides of the street. They were strongly attached to the language, religion, and social habits of their island home. They had set up their church, the "Iglesia de Dios Pentacostal" in the first floor of a house and a music shop broadcasted their most popular tunes all day. They tended to have an on-street life, but unfortunately, that part of the South End was not suitable for such a form of outdoor living. The fast and reckless traffic on Shawmut Avenue was a hazard and most of the surrounding streets were dilapidated and abandoned or else inhabited by other ethnic groups.

It seemed to me that it was the young children of this Puerto Rican community who suffered most because of their inadequate and unsatisfactory living accommodations. I had the opportunity to observe a playground from my window (from now on I will call it "Playground No. I") composed of an asphalt court with a few monkey bars and jungle gyms and a vacant lot. The first area was mostly used by the youths of the neighboring black community and seemed to be unattractive to the Puerto Rican children. They spent most of the afternoon in the second area, the vacant lot, which was the only place in the neighborhood where they could

play without fear of the traffic.

The lot was an open piece of land along Shawmut Avenue. The only materials it provided for play were piles of debris and refuse. It was used occasionally as a parking lot and as a pedestrian short cut. The games of the Puerto Rican children were improvised from the junk and consisted mostly in walking and hopping over the piles and puddles, and in rummaging around in the dumps, over and over, all day long. However the attention span of the children was short, as if they had no real interest in their activities. They reminded me of animals in captivity who perform in endless repetitions -- walk back and forth, sit in a corner of the cage, and cling to the bars -- finding their environment unattractive and their condition unpleasant.

Verbal communication among the children was almost nonexistent. Although their area provided materials to build with, they were not interested in doing this and used whatever was available in the most immediate way. For example, the contours of the puddles were used as a ready-made running circuit.

One day I was particularly surprised because the children were simultaneously building and destroying their work, as Penelope in Homer's Odyssey. Some of them were piling the stones up while the others were on the top of the pile throwing the stones around. They seemed interested in getting immediate fun out of their activity and not in building or shaping something permanent. I tried to put myself in their place. It seemed to me that scouting and rummaging games were the only possible in the vacant lot. For example, there were very few opportunities for sitting

down and talking because there weren't places free from pedestrians and general tumult. And, any work done by the children would have been destroyed by more powerful users.

After one month spent observing the sameness of the games of the Puerto Rican children I was curious to find out about the activities of the youths in the other sections of my neighborhood. The following pages deal with my observations on this field trip, during which I encountered the three other play areas significant to this study.

It was a pleasant afternoon in late summer. Shawmut Avenue was directly lit by the rays of the setting sun and the mild weather encouraged the people to stay outside. One block past Blackstone Park, at the intersection with Canton Street I found a vest pocket park; a treehouse made of colorful posts, boards, and ropes. From now on I will call this park "Playground No. 2". It provided climbing structures, such as spider webs; and a stage, a wooden platform placed at the bottom of a huge mural. A group of kids, boys and girls from ages 6 - 12, were acting on the platform. Two girls were pretending to be singers while the rest of the group danced in a circle around them. As they told me later, all of them liked to perform and they hoped to become singers, actors, and dancers. They lived in another neighborhood, Cathedral Project, a public housing settlement, but they liked to come here, when their mothers allowed, because it was the only place where they could find a stage and imagine they were performers. In the playground there was another group of children who came from nearby and seemed unable to join into the activities. They just dangled from the swings and watched.

During my conversation with the children who were performing, they kept repeating the titles of songs and the names of singers they liked best and started acting around me when they realized that I was interested in what they were doing. The impression which I had from this visit was that the park was fostering the acting abilities of the kids and that the whole park provided good structures for that purpose.

Passing Canton Street, the livability of the South End suddenly improved. There no longer seemed to exist the sense of harshness and isolation which characterized the sections I had just visited. Instead, all around were signs of a friendly community life. For example, people were sitting on the stoops, or putting a chair on the sidewalk so that they could sit down and talk. The exteriors of the houses and the small front gardens were neat and pleasantly decorated and the public areas of streets and sidewalks were noticeably cleaner. Even the traffic on this part of Shawmut Avenue was remarkably less than in the upper section of the street, and this factor too, permitted the residents to stroll along and mingle out-of-doors.

Even the kids seemed to enjoy the fact that the life in this part of the neighborhood was much easier than elsewhere. They swarmed around in groups and had a variety of on-street games, such as "Kick the Can", "Leap Frog", and "Steal the Bacon". The environment seemed to provide them with many places to play, or to chat with a few friends.

In this area was a third playground (from now on called "Playground No. 3") providing play areas at three different levels. The lowest one was beneath the street, and had a basketball court. The intermediate one was an empty platform, slightly also beneath the street

level; and the third one at street level, had some benches and some concrete forms: cubes, slabs, and steps. All the parts including the ground were made out of concrete and the major concern of the designer seemed to have been achieving an artistic result using materials impossible to vandalize.

The three areas were full of children and teen-agers at play. Each group was concerned with its own activity and ignored the other groups. Some Chinese kids were playing basketball, some girls were roller-skating on the empty platform and a group of boys and girls gathered around the concrete forms, standing and sitting engaged in idle conversation. This last group of kids told me that they felt "pissed off" because they had been "kicked off" the basketball court by the "big kids" who were playing. They were very bitter and it seemed that the playground was frequently a cause of complaints among them and the other groups of players. Everybody, they said, wanted to use the basketball court, and when the court was occupied there was nothing left for the rest to do but wait. "Architects who design playgrounds don't think of kids," they said.

The concrete forms were useless and unattractive to them. They reminded me of some odd plastic sofas which I saw in the waiting room of the Port Authority Station in New York City -- hollows carved in a big rounded mass of plastic, where the people seemed to be in a pillory.

The impression I gained from my visit to this playground was that the environment provided possibilities only for playing ordinary athletic games, such as basketball, baseball, and roller-skating.

When I left this playground and went back to Shawmut Avenue, it was almost twilight. There weren't any more groups of kids walking around the neighborhood. The play-day was over and the kids were grouping -- I guessed -- near their home environments.

Almost at the end of Shawmut Avenue in the last block there was what appeared to be just a single fenced asphalt play area -- a street court with three hoops for playing basketball. Once I entered the court, however, I discovered that there were other play areas, a yard, a back lot and other basketball courts. The boundaries of the total play environment were hazy. It was not clear which were the areas designed by architects for play, and which had been designated by the users as desirable and useful extensions of the formal playground per se. The facilities were located in many places and were mixed with buildings and vacant lots. I called the total play environment "Playground No. 4".

I stopped in the back lot. The place was protected from Shawmut Avenue by a row of houses and gave a sense of privacy. In front of me some children were absorbed in making something with sand and materials and in doing this seemed to have reached a fusion of work-play. Nearby there were some benches where teenagers sat engrossed in conversation. Some small children played basketball and still others played amidst the older kids. The manner in which the kids played seemed to be relaxed. And they seemed to be a large community of players. This was very different from what I had observed in the other playgrounds, and particularly in the concrete one, Playground No. 3, where the players were not able to share the same facilities or to develop a conversation.

The kids seemed very familiar with the place. They were not disturbed by my presence, and I was able to observe them without diverting their attention. Another child joined the kids who were working with the sand and they started talking until they decided to remove a long so that it would be possible to ride the bicycle on the sand. Some other teen-agers joined the group on the bench. They were chatting, smoking cigarettes, and passing around a can of soda. They were swapping girlfriend and boyfriend stories and were making fun of each other. Someone got mad, left the group for a while and went on the sand and started to play drums with a decorated rubbish barrel.

On the sand in front of me there remained the ditches and materials left by the children. The patterns seemed to indicate that they had made a large circular sitting place. With darkness the teen-agers hugged each other. Some kids relaxed on a slide and on the sand. The small children gathered around them, playing, wrestling or clinging to their shoulders. Other kids arrived from Shawmut Avenue to join this end-of-the-day celebration and some of them sat next to me. Conversation started very easily. They were not defensive but extremely open, extroverted, and talked spontaneously about themselves and the place.

Observing these scenes I had a new impression of what play could be. I had in mind a continuous activity which involved not only games, but many other activities as well. For example working with the physical environment and mingling. These activities seemed to be possible because the ground was soft and the area was protected. That is it had materials to play with and secluded parts where the kids could mingle privately.

This last aspect seemed to me to be the most attractive. The kids were interested in each other and were able to build relationships among themselves. This behavior was a relevant difference between Playground No. 4 and the other playgrounds which I encountered during the field trip.

C: Map of the four playgrounds on Shawmut Avenue



LEGEND

- 1: Playground No. 1
- 2: Playground No. 2
- 3: Playground No. 3
- 4: Playground No. 4

- A: Shawmut Avenue
- B: Massachusetts Avenue
- C: Washington Street
- D: Blackstone Park
- E: Canton Street
- F: Waltham Street
- G: Dover Street
- H: MBTA Dover Station
- I: Cathedral Project
- L: Castle Square Project

Nord



0 feet 1000



D : Playground No. 1



E: Playground No. 2

"A group of kids, boys and girls, were acting on the platform. Two girls were pretending to be singers while the rest of the group danced in a circle around them." (p. 8)



F: Playground No. 3

"The concrete forms were useless and unattractive to them (kids). They reminded me of some odd plastic sofas which I saw in the ..." (pp.10-11)



G: Playground No. 4

"Nearby there were some benches where teen-agers sat engrossed in a conversation." (pp. 11-12)



H: Playground No. 4

"With the darkness the teen-agers hugged each other. Some kids relaxed on a slide and on the sand. The small children gathered around them... ." (p. 12)

I. Hunches

The impressions I received from my initial visit were so rich that for a while I sat down reflecting on what I had observed. For a long period of time that September visit was a pot where I could drop a dipper and pull up memories, recall details, and form hunches.

Particularly, I wanted to consider at length why the behavior of the kids in the last playground was so different. In order to accomplish this I outlined the following steps:

The first step, reported below ¹, consisted of evoking my memories and writing down my thoughts about the four playgrounds and my hunches as to why they differed.

The second step, reported below ², consisted of developing the above hunches and making more observations to test and develop these hunches further.

The third step, reported below ³, consisted of developing a list of questions to ask and things to observe about Playground No. 4.

"Planning for Play"⁴ is an essay by Lady Margary Allen of Hurtwood about physical design of playgrounds. It provided me with an overview from which I was able to develop four definitions which applied to the four environments of my survey. It seemed to me to be that some playgrounds had a static and solid nature whereas others by accident or by design were more fluid and provided the youths with many possibilities

(1) See pp. 30-31 below.

(2) See pp. 32-33 below.

(3) See pp. 41 below.

(4) Lady Margary Allen of Hurtwood. Planning for Play. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1968. (Cf. pp. 18-19).

for moving around, making games, or even changing the physical environment.

I arranged the definitions along a continuum from least to most with regard to the static or solid nature of the playgrounds, e.g., least solid to most solid:

Stage I, "Ironmongery Playground", i.e., a playground which is a maze and proliferation of bars. This definition applied to the asphalt court of Playground No. 1, which was an area perfectly flat and exposed -- with some monkey and jungle bars. The youths seemed interested only in basketball sessions. They didn't like the environment to the point that they destroyed it: fencing and bars were torn down and the ground covered with broken bottles. (From observations it would seem that the second area, the vacant lot, was more relevant to the children's needs. The environment was more varied and soft -- there were materials, piles of junk -- and provided the children with more possibilities for playing.)

Stage II, "Art Playground", i.e., a playground made out of artistic forms such as platforms, parapets, and steps designed more for the esthetic satisfaction of the artist than for the needs of the players. This was the case of Playground No. 3. The environment provided variations in the geometry of the ground and in the forms which had been used, but it was all solid, and each area was designed for a specific game. This playground provided limited possibilities for the players to modify their environment and invent games.

Stage III, "Creative Playground", i.e., a would-be child environment as conceived by adults. This was the case of Playgroband No. 2, the treehouse made out of posts, boards, and ropes. The ground was soft and

the makeshift structures provided a variety of ways for moving around, playing, and also building. But everything was designed by an adult mind and to the children the structures seemed suitable only for role playing actors and monkeys.

Stage IV, "Do-it-yourself Playground", i.e., a play environment largely adapted and manipulated by the kids themselves. This was the case of Playground No. 4. The environment was more complex than the other three for there was a variety of areas to play in. Some parts provided materials for changing the environment itself. The youths seemed well settled in these parts and seemed to have modified them. For example, they set up the sandy area with materials to play with and changed the ground in order to sit down and relax.

Each one of the above stages describes a playground which assigned successively more freedom of action to the players. Playground No. 4 provided the players with the most freedom for making games and adapting the environment to fit their needs. On the contrary, Playground No. 1 represented an environment where the Puerto Rican children had the least freedom, since they were dominated by more powerful users, such as pedestrians, and were disturbed by the general tumult of their play area.

Nevertheless, this concept of freedom of action, sic et simpliciter, seems to me too general. I prefer to break it down via more detailed aspects -- hunches which point out the differences among the four playgrounds in a more specific way. The aspects were:

Playground privacy. Some playgrounds were exposed that is, an open asphalt area with a fence, while others had secluded parts and

nooks which seemed to provide the players with more freedom for mingling privately.

Playground moldability. Some playgrounds were solid, made out of steel and concrete, while others were soft because they had materials that could be shaped. This latter type seemed to provide the players with more opportunities for adapting or changing the environment.

Playground flexibility. Some playgrounds had only defined standard equipment such as monkey bars and basketball courts, while others provided complex structures and settings suitable for establishing a variety of activities and relationships.

Playground boundaries. Some playgrounds were bounded by a fence and were sharply separated from the rest of the environment, while others were not differentiated from the city. These latter enabled the youths to play in the total area (playground and surroundings).

The four aspects above illustrated the qualities of the physical environment which seemed to me most related to freedom of action. I also wrote down two more hunches about the attitude of the youths at play.

Group variety. Some playgrounds were attended exclusively by fixed groups of youths, while in others the makeup of the players was much more complex and flexible. They seemed to come from many neighborhoods and for various purposes: to play games, meet with friends or just loll about.

Group nature. In some playgrounds children and teen-agers segregated themselves by age, race, or sex and formed distinct groups which competed for exclusive use of the facilities. On other playgrounds

players of diverse characteristics moved very easily in an extroverted, comfortable manner from one cluster to another as if they were a large community.



I: Views of the four playgrounds

2. Initial observations of the four playgrounds and more elaborate hunches

My second step consisted of further developing my initial hunches through new observations. In doing this I looked at the groups of youths which I had noted during my first visit: the Puerto Rican children in Playground No. 1, the group of performers in Playground No. 2 and the teen-agers with whom I talked in Playgrounds No. 3 and No. 4.

What follows is a summary of my new observations. They are grouped according to the six aspects of freedom of action that were identified above. Also they are arranged in a continuum from least to most with regard to the particular aspect of freedom of action being presented, e.g., least privacy to most privacy. Each aspect is edited in a storyboard form.

PRIVACYMOLDABILITYleast
privacy

Pl.1: the vacant lot is open and crossed by pedestrians. The Puerto Rican children are chased by the bigger kids and seem unable to find a place to sit down quietly and talk.

Pl.3: the concrete forms are designed to provide secluded seats. But they are uncomfortable and don't provide any privacy. The kids stand up and pull and push each other.

Pl.2: a platform on the posts is shaped like an enclosed hut and children like to sit down here and talk.

Pl.4: the benches on the sandy area are isolated from the surroundings. Here the youths sit down and chat quietly.

most
privacy

Pl.3: all the playground(platforms, steps, artistic forms) is made out of concrete. This discourages the youths from playing with materials and changing the environment.

Pl.1: the vacant lot provides materials to build with, but the works of the children are destroyed by pedestrians. The children seem discouraged from shaping something.

Pl.2: the playground has some soft parts, such as sand and rope webs. The kids change these settings in order to make them adapt to tumble.

Pl.4: around the sandy area there are materials and other elements (barrel, logs, boards) used by the kids to play or to make arrangements of the environment.

least
moldab.most
moldab.

FLEXIBILITY

Pl.3: the play areas allow only athletic games. For example, basketball, baseball or roller-skating.

Pl.1: the activities of the Puerto Rican children are mostly inspired by the junk and consist of making games on the piles of debris or of rummaging in the dumps.

Pl.2: the platforms and other wooden structures are used by the children from Cathedral Project exclusively for acting and performing.

Pl.4: the playground provides many possibilities for making games and developing relationships. The youths enjoy participating in games as well as being spectators, chatting and rolling around.

BOUNDARIES

Pl.1: the playground is bounded by a fence and the surroundings are not suitable for playing because of the dangerous car traffic. All the activities of the children develop in the vacant lot.

Pl.2: same as above. All the games of the children develop inside the park.

Pl.3: the park is bounded by a railing which limits the possibilities of playing in the surroundings. However the streets are safe for play and the kids have many street games.

Pl.4: the boundaries of the playground are hazy and the play areas are mixed with streets, yards and buildings. There are many entries and throughways. The kids play in the total environs.

least
flexibil.

clear
boundar.

most
flexibil.

hazy
boundar.

GROUP VARIETY

Pl.1: the play=ground is fre=quented only by the same groups: the Puerto Rican children and the youths from the neighboring Black community.

Pl.2: same situation as above. local players and the children from the Cathedral Project.

Pl.3: same situation as above: groups of players from the close neighborhood.

Pl.4: the makeup of the players is complex. Seemingly there are three major groups: athletic teams, goof off's who like to loll about and kids who look habitués of the playground.

GROUP NATURE

Pl.1: the players form separate groups, i.e. Blacks and Puerto Ricans and are defensive toward each other and toward strangers.

Pl.2: same situation as above: local players and the children from the Cathedral Project.

Pl.3: the players form separate groups, i.e. small girls, teenagers from the same neighborhood, Chinese kids, basketball players and so on.

Pl.4: the players form mixed groups which include boys, girls and kids from different ethnic backgrounds. They have a friendly attitude with each other and me.

defensive nature

extrov.d nature

least variety

most variety

The foregoing sets of comments and illustrations called my attention to the peculiarities of the fourth playground. Playground No. 4 consistently appeared at the high or "most" end of the continuum I had established in my storyboards. This indicated that each particular aspect of freedom of action was most fully developed in Playground No. 4. For example, it provided the youths with the most privacy or with the best opportunities for molding the play environment.

Following the new observations it seemed possible for me to arrange the six aspects of freedom of action in a more elaborated form, making correlations among them. These correlations were for me particularly evident in Playground No. 4, and this seemed to me a reason why I should focus on the study of this last environment.

Referring back to my initial observations and hunches, it appeared that the most peculiar aspect of Playground No. 4 was the mixed and extroverted nature of the youths at play (Aspect 6, Group nature). They formed mixed aggregations (by age, sex and race) and acted as if they were a large, well-integrated community of players. This aspect, the Group nature, seemed to be related in various ways to the other five. On the one hand, Playground No. 4 had hazy boundaries (Aspect 4, Playground boundaries) and had features which made it fit for a wide range of activities and relationships (Aspect 3, Playground flexibility). Both the above aspects seemed to attract players of different neighborhoods who came for different purposes (Aspect 5, Group variety) and to foster the extroverted and mixed nature of the youths (Aspect 6, Group nature). On the other hand, Playground No. 4 provided the players with many private

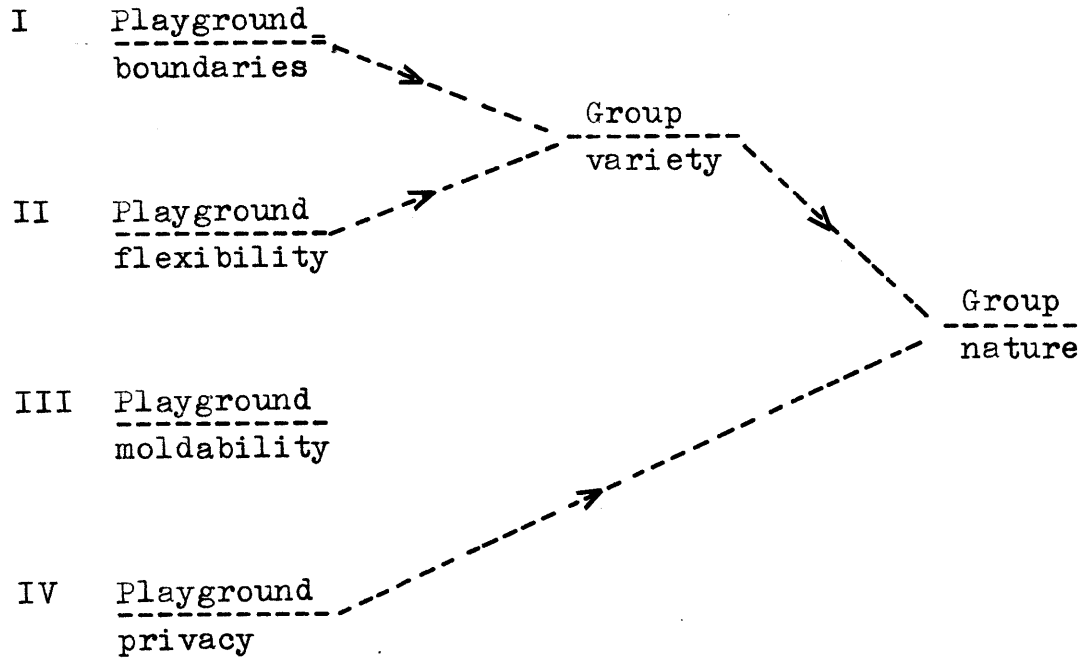
places to sit and talk (Aspect 1, Playground privacy) and this also seemed to lead to their extroverted and mixed nature (Aspect 6).

The correlations among the initial hunches led me to three more elaborate hunches. For example, the hunch about the Playground boundaries led to the idea about the Group variety and this led to the idea about the Group nature. The hunch about the Playground flexibility also led to the idea about the Group variety and to the idea about the Group nature. Finally, the hunch about the Playground privacy led to the idea about the Group nature. There remained one aspect Playground moldability not related to the other five aspects. Yet it seemed to have an effect on the children's sense of inventiveness and I considered it an area for further investigation.

The new hunches are illustrated below by the pictorial representation. (The arrow means leads to, implying a causal relation between the left side and the right side of the arrow.) They marked a turning point in my study, and I planned a new session of field trips in Playground No. 4 in order to test them.

Diagram 1: elaborated hunches

Correlations among the six aspects of freedom of action in Playground No. 4.



B: More detailed observations and interviews

In this section I test the elaborated hunches about Playground No. 4 stated earlier. The reader may refer to the preceding page for a diagrammatical recapitulation of the hunches.

I. First elaborated hunch: that a haziness of play area borders (Aspect 4, Playground boundaries) is apt to attract variegated sets of users (Aspect 5, Group variety) and fosters their extroverted and mixed nature (Aspect 6, Group nature).

The area of Playground No. 4 was an irregular and mixed piece of land partially occupied by a school and other buildings which had been vacated. The area was located between Washington Street and Shawmut Avenue and was connected to the neighborhood by a few alleys (Groton, Bradford, Medford Streets and Briggs Place).

The facilities of Playground No. 4 were located in different parts of this area. The impression given was that the designer had scattered them wherever there was a plot of clear land. The result of this casual design was an unusual and complex mixture of specifically designed play areas, yards, streets and buildings. Basically the part of the playground designed by the B.R.A. included two play areas: the street court, large basketball court located along Shawmut Avenue, and second, the back lot, an area which was separated from Shawmut Avenue by a row of vacant houses and which contained various facilities: a swimming pool, three basketball courts and a sandy area with children equipment.

In addition to the above two areas there was a third user-designated play area. After 2:30 p.m., when school was dismissed, the youths were able to play in the yard of the school and in other small spaces adjacent to the school building.

All of these areas were bounded by and connected to the environs in various ways. The street court was fenced, but the fence had several holes and the court was easily visible from and accessible to Shawmut Avenue. The school precincts were set back from the street and surrounded by heavy iron railing opening to Groton Street and Briggs Place on two other sides. Although this lot was the most secluded part of the playground, it provided a variety of entries. There were, in addition to the boundary alleys, two paths, that I shall call the decorated path and the headquarters path, both of which led to vacant lots and yards that were boarded up.

My initial observations of the activities of the players led me to the conclusion that they made no distinction between in-and off-playground activities. The nearby section of Shawmut Avenue was an area which was extremely alive with kids and which contained many of their hangouts, such as the soda shop on the Dwight Street Corner. Nevertheless I observed that one part of the playground, the street court, played an important role in fostering contacts among the players. Since the place was very crowded everyone was forced to participate in the games.

After making the observations which I have reported, I started studying the habits of the players in Playground No. 4, particularly their schedules of arrivals and departures. I noted that some of them met in the playground early in the afternoon and remained in the area for the

rest of the day. I called them initially full-time players, to distinguish them from the everchanging groups which used the playground for shorter periods.

During succeeding field trips I became aware of the identity of the full-time players so that I was able to describe them as a family. They were the same group of kids I had encountered in my first visit and the term "family" seemed appropriate to them. The older ones of the group cherished the small children like mothers and quelled their disputes. They also enjoyed mock wrestling bouts with the younger ones as fathers do.

My early conversation with the family established the location of the homes of the kids and provided me with some of their reactions about the playground and its population. I learned, for instance, that none of them was living next door to the playground. They came from other sections of the South End or from other districts. Their comments revealed that they liked the playground because of its mixed racial makeup, the "friendly people" in the streets, and the various possibilities the environment provided for playing and hanging around.

To summarize, the mixed and extroverted nature of the players was particularly evident in the street court because this area compelled them to get together. The group which I had identified as a family was the most mixed and extroverted, as they had developed interest in and affection for each other.

II. Second elaborated hunch: that a playground which is fit for many activities and relationships (Aspect 3, Playground flexibility)

will attract different sets of users (Aspect 5, Group variety) and thus foster a mixed and extroverted nature.

Playground No. 4 provided the opportunity for a large variety of activities in addition to the usual equipment and facilities. Its facilities were good. These were the swimming pool, the basketball courts, and the asphalt school yard, one of the few areas large enough to play a hockey game on. Many visiting teams used to come on weekends from other neighborhoods, and the yard was transformed into a colorful fiesta, with crowds of spectators and players.

The basketball courts and the yard were fringed by sidelines and allowed these various groups to play next to each other. This helped the newly arrived players to easily find a place to stay without coming into conflict with the other players. In addition to the above areas, the sandy area was the most adaptable part of the playground and even though it was designed as a child area it was used by the teen-agers as well. There were eight swings, a slide and a jungle gym. Since the ground was soft there were many possible uses. For example, making games with materials. Even the swings seemed to be put to better use because they were located on the sand. It was possible for the children to practice swinging on their bellies, or to jump off the swings.

The sandy area was also the most central part of the playground and thus was frequently crossed by swarms of players at very short intervals. Yet a part of it was cut off from the main traffic streams and was used as a private sitting pit for the family. This part, which I call the Headquarters, included some benches and a small path, the

headquarters path.

My conversation with the family revealed that the kids particularly liked Playground No. 4 because there was a large choice of activities. They liked to arrange their play day in a progression of games. "First I play basketball, then I swing when I get tired, and then I play tag when it gets dark," said one twelve year old named Philip. The older kids had a similar attitude. They gathered in the Headquarters, then moved over to the street court and then left for excursions into the neighborhood.

From the observation of the family I learned that the kids were particularly versatile in inventing games or in finding out possible uses for the available settings, including most of the dwellings around the playground which were vacant. Thus, they used the school fire escape and the boarded up facades of some houses across Briggs Place as climbing structures or places for escaping into a fantasy world.

To summarize, a major point seemed to me that the facilities were adaptable to many uses and provided areas where the kids could interchange from one group to another in a very relaxed and natural manner. I also discovered the Headquarters of the family and that the group's play was arranged in a progression.

III. Third elaborated hunch: that an environment apt to be shaped by the kids (Aspect 2, Playground moldability) fosters their sense of inventiveness.

Some parts of Playground No. 4 had been molded by the kids. One of these was the Headquarters and its adjacent sandy area. The kids had given particular attention to the arrangement of materials, and used to clean up the rubbish from the sand and the grass. The place was well kept and didn't look like a no man's land. This impression was furthered by the graffiti on the wall and the decorations the kids had made on the boards and on the logs. In the Headquarters the kids were able to find many ways of playing with the various parts. For example, the slide was transformed into a small hut and was used as a relaxing board by children and teen-agers.

Other parts within the playground area which had been changed by the kids were the vacant houses along Shawmut Avenue and Briggs Place. The kids fixed up two of them and made them into group club houses. I called the first one the Mingle Club House and the second one the Climbing Club House. The first one was used by the boys and girls for private conversation and petting sessions because it had a door and afforded some privacy. The second was more of a giant jungle gym used solely for climbing feats. The two club houses were secret places where no one but the family was allowed to enter. Even in their accounts the kids were extremely reserved. In the houses they also kept the things to which they were most attached. For example, seven-year old Joey was raising his kittens there.

The familiarity with the total area (Headquarters, sandy area and club houses) provided the kids with a sense of competence in the use of its equipment and materials. They had also a strong attachment to the whole playground. As they told me on many occasions,

they thought that they had "done it" and that the playground was their place. They felt concerned and "pissed off" because, they said, "bad guys are around at night and dump bottles and cans in the park."

To summarize, in taking a close look at the family I discovered that they were attached to and competent in the use of their special territory, the Headquarters and the two club houses.

IV. Fourth elaborated hunch: that an area which affords some measure of seclusion (Aspect 1, Playground privacy) will appeal to users of both sexes from different age levels and backgrounds (Aspect 6, Group nature).

Playground No. 4 had various isolated places where the kids were able to sit and talk. Such were the stoops of the Mingle Club House. The place was a niche suitable for sitting down and talking privately. For example, Steve and Gloria, his girlfriend would stay here, hand in hand and out of view. Another such place was the Headquarters. It was also free from the tumult of the surrounding areas, the street court, the yard and the basketball court.

Both of the places which I mentioned had locations which were particularly favorable for their use as meeting and chatting places. They were central, and easily accessible from the various parts of the play areas and the close neighborhood. When dark fell, the privacy of the Headquarters was improved and the conversation of the kids became more quiet and friendly. They hugged each other as if they liked to feel close physically. They were less giddy and

more absorbed in their stories.

The conversation with the kids, and particularly with the adolescents, revealed that one of the main reasons why they liked the playground was that it was the only park they knew where "there were girls". By way of explanation they made me note that they could make friends of the opposite sex, because there were places to sit and talk privately. They said that they were able to get along together because there was the opportunity to relax and stretch out on the sand out of view of passers-by.

To summarize, Playground No. 4 provided privacy which encouraged personal relationships to grow.

North

50

0 feet

45

J: Map of Playground No. 4

street court

bench

School

yard

fire escape

small yard

Dwight
Street

G R O T O N S T R E E T

S
H
A
W
M
U
T

A
V
E
N
U
E

H e a d -
quarters

Mingle Club
House

decorated
path

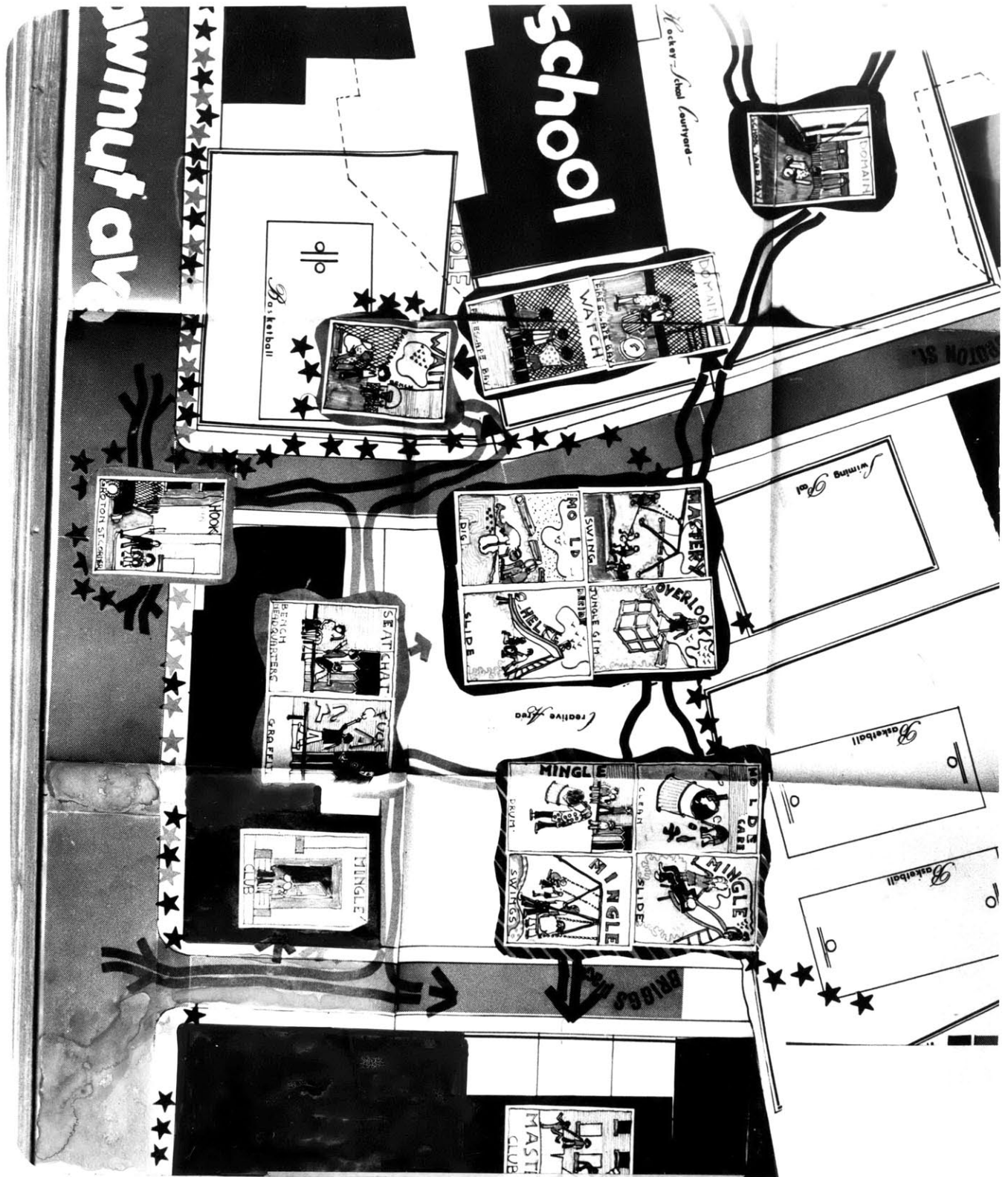
swimming pool

basketball courts

B R I G G S P L A C E

vacant lots

Climbing Club House



K: Use map of Playground No. 4

I. Concept of family

The primary user of Playground No. 4 were those kids I have previously referred to as a "family". In this section I develop the concept of family, discussing why it was important and how it was related to the playground itself.

The family was composed of a core of 20 children and teen-agers. Most of them lived in the South End in the section between Waltham and Dover Streets. The group included whites, blacks and kids from the Spanish speaking community. The name "family" seemed to be an appropriate label for the group. During my visits to the playground I observed that the teen-agers took care of the little children as if they were their parents. Later on I discovered that there was a specific group place, the Headquarters, where they gathered. Finally I found that the whole group felt an attachment to the place and felt familiar with it as if it was their own home.

Dan, the historian of the group, told me that Steve started the family, in the sense that he had prevented the kids from throwing stones against the windows of the cars and had moved them from the streets to the playground. Throughout the time I visited the playground, peaceful activities were flourishing (and the kids seemed to be enjoying a Golden Age.)

The group had a family-like order. Moe was the father and represented the strongest authority. He was at the center of the group when the teen-agers gathered to make decisions and was the most beloved by the young children. His girl friend Karen acted like a mother to the little kids, quelling their disputes and cherishing them. She

seemed to have the entire group's respect. The other adolescents, too, had a protective attitude toward the children and were related to each other by bonds of affection.

A distinctive characteristic of the family was that they were all full time players. They stayed in the playground from early in the afternoon until late in the evening. Also the adolescents of the family spent most of the time in conversation with one another, unlike their peers from outside. The most significant moment of the family was the end-of-the-day gathering in the Headquarters. This happened late in the evening, when the play day was over. During this ceremony the group nature became clear. The kids were tender to each other, by hugging each other and holding hands, relaxing and rolling on the ground and worming all together.

The concept of family appeared to be related in three main ways to the aspects of the physical environment. They are as follows:

First, Playground No. 4 provided settings (the sandy area and the vacant houses) capable of being molded by the players themselves. The environment helped develop relationships which led to the growth of the family.

Secondly, the playground provided settings (the Headquarters and the club houses) where the kids could mingle without being disturbed by the local population and this fostered ties of affection among them.

Finally, the children and the teen-agers shared the same play area -- a portion of the sand in front of the Headquarters -- and this circumstance fostered the growth of familiar relationships among

different age groups.

The following pictorial scheme shows the map of Playground No. 4 and the area shared by the two age groups.

List of the members of the family

1. Steve (m, w, 18¹, 12 blocks²). He started the family.
2. Gloria (f³, w, 16, 6 blocks). She is Steve's girlfriend.
3. Moe (m, w, 16, 2 blocks). Since Steve is often off, he takes the leadership and is the "father".
4. Karen (f, w, 13, 6 blocks). She is Moe's girlfriend and the "mother".
5. Robert (m, w, 17, lives in Dorchester).
6. Dan (m, w, 18, 8 blocks). He is Steve's advisor".
7. Thomas (m, b⁴, 17, 10 blocks).
8. Walter (m, b, 16, 3 blocks).
9. Michael (m, w, 16, 2 blocks).
10. Bonnie (f, w, 15, 6 blocks). She used to be Walter's girlfriend.
11. Gorilla (m, b, 16, 7 blocks).
12. Steve Mill (m, b, 15, he used to live in the South End, but recently moved to Dorchester).
13. Chris (f, w, 13, 3 blocks).
14. Roy (m, Puerto Rican, 12, 3 blocks).
15. Philip (m, Cuban, 12, 5 blocks).
16. Milton (m, Cuban, 12, 6 blocks).
17. Little Joe (m, Puerto Rican, 12, recently moved to Dorchester).
18. Sand Paper (m, Puerto Rican, 8, 4 blocks).
19. Joey (m, w, 7, 3 blocks).
20. Frankie (m, Puerto Rican, 6, 2 blocks).

1. m: male, w: white, 18: 18 years old.

2. The length of one block along Shawmut Avenue is approximately 200 ft.

3. f: female.

LEGEND

- A: Headquarters (teen-agers, mostly)
B: sandy area, teen-agers activities
C: sandy area, children and teenagers activities.



M



N



O



P

2. The kind of playground the players wanted to have

Many conversations with the kids of the family were centered around the question "What would you like to do in the playground, if given the opportunity?". The answers which I received were significant for two reasons. First, they were precise and detailed. The kids reminded me of a housewife who talks about the alterations she wants in the kitchen and knows exactly what she wants to do in order to improve the quality of the room. Secondly, the main proposal of the kids was to make a small hut near the sand.

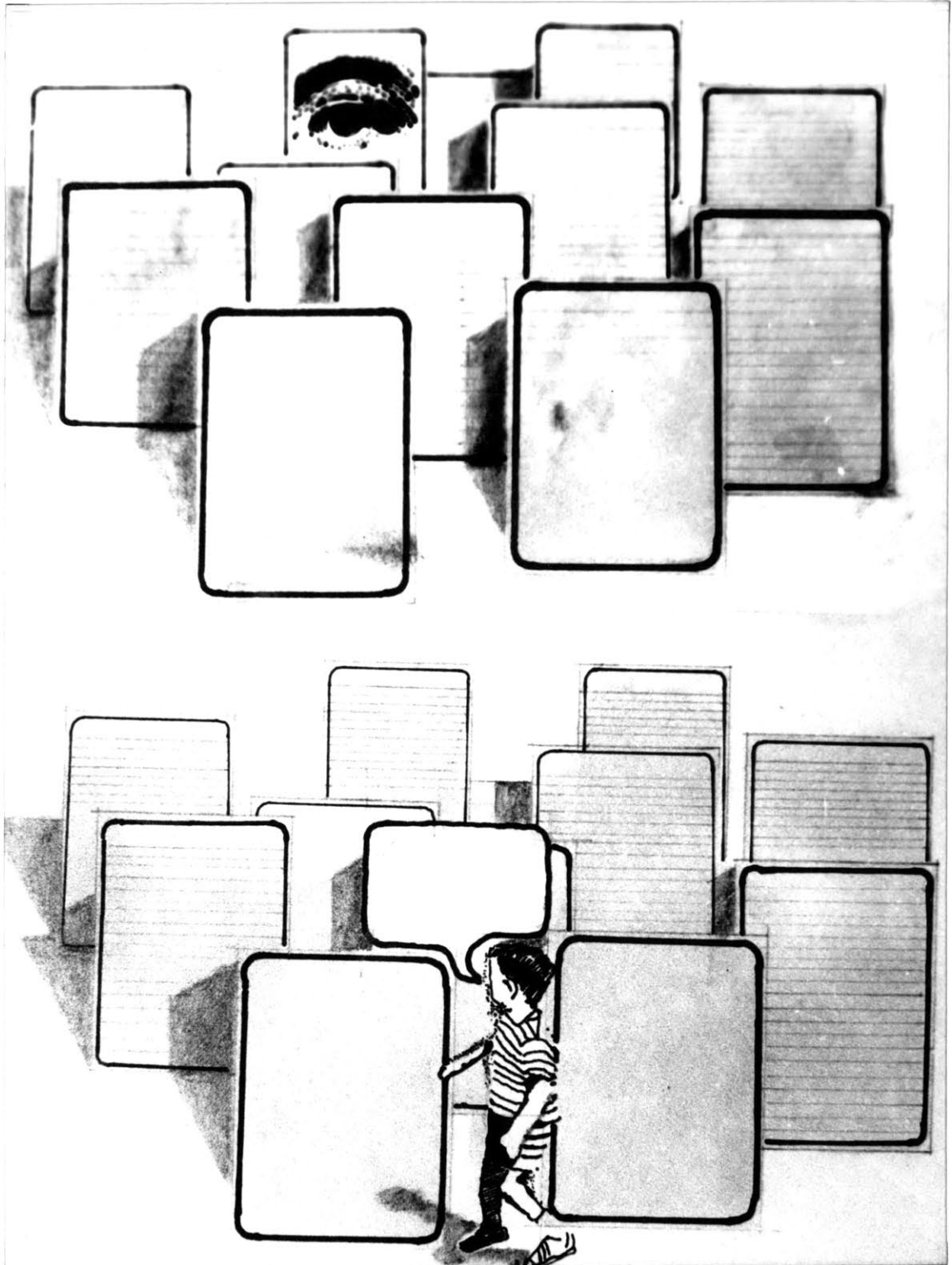
This proposal was significant because the small hut was a wish which was shared by all the group and revealed that they had family-like needs. For example, they wished to have a place in the hut to make food and a living room where they could play cards, read or watch outside. The description of the hut was detailed and each member of the group made his own contribution to the proposal.

The other improvements projected by the kids concerned alterations of the Headquarters area. They were dreaming about making the place more habitable with a water fountain, a rock pool, and more sandy and grassy areas to relax. Lights were requested for the basketball courts, so that they could play at night. The Headquarters, they said, had to remain dark so it would not lose its privacy.

C. Method for the above part

1. Observations

2. Interviews



C. Method for the above part

The information for Section A was gathered through field trips. The initial visits to the environments were intended to provide sufficient opportunity for gathering as much information as I could, through observations and interviews with the players. These were unstandardized¹ interviews, in which I introduced questions which seemed to me especially applicable to the individual case. From the above information I selected those aspects which depicted the differences among the four different environments I was studying. Afterwards I went on several focused field trips during which I further analyzed, through more observations, those differences.

The information for Section B was gathered by a more elaborate method both for making observations and interviewing. The information was focused on specific aspects, settings and individuals. I used a focused interview technique².

(1) Eleanor B. Maccoby and Nathan Maccoby "The interview: A Tool of Social Science." Handbook of Social Psychology, I. Gardner Lindzey (ed.). Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1954. "In the unstandardized interview the interviewer's technique is completely flexible, and is varied from one respondent to another"(p. 451).

(2) (ibid.) "The focused interview employs an interview guide with a list of objectives and suggested questions but gives the interviewer considerable latitude within the frame of the interview guide."

1. Observations

I made more observations of Playground No. 4 focusing on those aspects which seemed most related to the hunches I had to test (see Diagram 1: Elaborated hunches, p. 39). I obtained most of the information about the environment by observing the kids of the family. I did this because the behavior of this group was more outgoing than the behavior of the other players. Therefore I felt that this would provide me with a better opportunity for observing how the different parts of the playground were used by the kids.

Finally, I found that a useful technique for observing was to sit down and concentrate my attention on specific settings. This helped me to find out how the settings were used and for which purposes. It also told me which players were the most versatile in the use of the settings.

For my observations I chose two main places. The bench in the street court and one of the benches at the Headquarters. The first bench was one of the busiest places in the playground and was a good observatory, since my presence was not noted. The Headquarters was more central and provided me with a close view of the family. However, it had a disadvantage in that I was easily noted and my presence diverted the activities of the kids.

2. Interviews

My way of interviewing the kids consisted of sitting and waiting until they spontaneously came to talk to me or to question me. The reason for doing this was that they were much more talkative when they initiated the conversation. This happened because the kids decided that they wanted to be interviewed, i.e. they were in a decision-making position.

It always happened that when I sat on the benches in the Headquarters one of the little kids would come close to me and the others would follow. In the Headquarters I was a stranger, and therefore the object of curiosity to the small ones because no one but the kids of the family ever gathered and played in this part.

The older kids came close only when many small children were gathered around me. Some kids, such as Dan, Robert or Philip played a special role in answering my questions because they were much more talkative by nature than the rest of the group. Once the circle of kids was formed around me I followed their conversation for a while and gradually diverted it toward the topic of my questions.

My experience with the kids of the family taught me that there were three kinds of questions which particularly stimulated them to talk about their activities in the playground, their relationships with close friends and the local population, and their wishes/dreams. The kinds of questions were:

One: "What do you do here (in the playground)?"

Two: "Why do you come here?"

Three: "What would you like to do to improve the playground?"

The kids answered my questions trying to make their own points as if we were in a conversation. The focused interview technique gave me the possibility of this kind of response.

The first question revealed information about the activities of the kids and I encouraged them to explain their view by specific questions about the games which they practiced in the various parts of the environment. This question was mostly used to develop Section B.

The second question revealed information about the family and the bonds of affection or mutual protection among the group. This question provided information utilized for the development of Section B,1.

The third question revealed information about the wishes/dreams of the kids and particularly the dream of the small hut. Mostly, this last question was used to develop Section B,2.

Nearly all of my interviews were conducted with a circle of kids gathered around me. The questions usually were posed individually but were answered collectively. In most cases my question was but a pretext for starting conversation among the kids. In these cases I found it particularly useful to listen to them and to take note of their arguments. An example of this was when they started talking about the small hut, describing to each other how it should be and what there should be. I had started the conversation by simple asking the kids "What do you wish in the playground?"

D. Preliminary conclusions and formulation of my hypotheses.

Following the study of Playground No. 4 it was my interest to extend my research to other play environments. Particularly I wanted to make comparisons between new study cases and the environment which I had studied.

For the purpose of keeping alive the problem I was dealing with, I started visiting playgrounds and public parks chosen initially in an unplanned way. I used to stop wherever I happened to meet kids at play: in courtyards, sidewalks, or in the middle of a street; in a junkyard, in an open air exhibition of sculptures, in a manicured small garden, in a large wasteland area, in a vandalized tot lot, or in a noisy, busy and crowded city corner; on the stoops of a house or on the bench of a park; in a children's zoo-like, open air gym, or in a treehouse park.

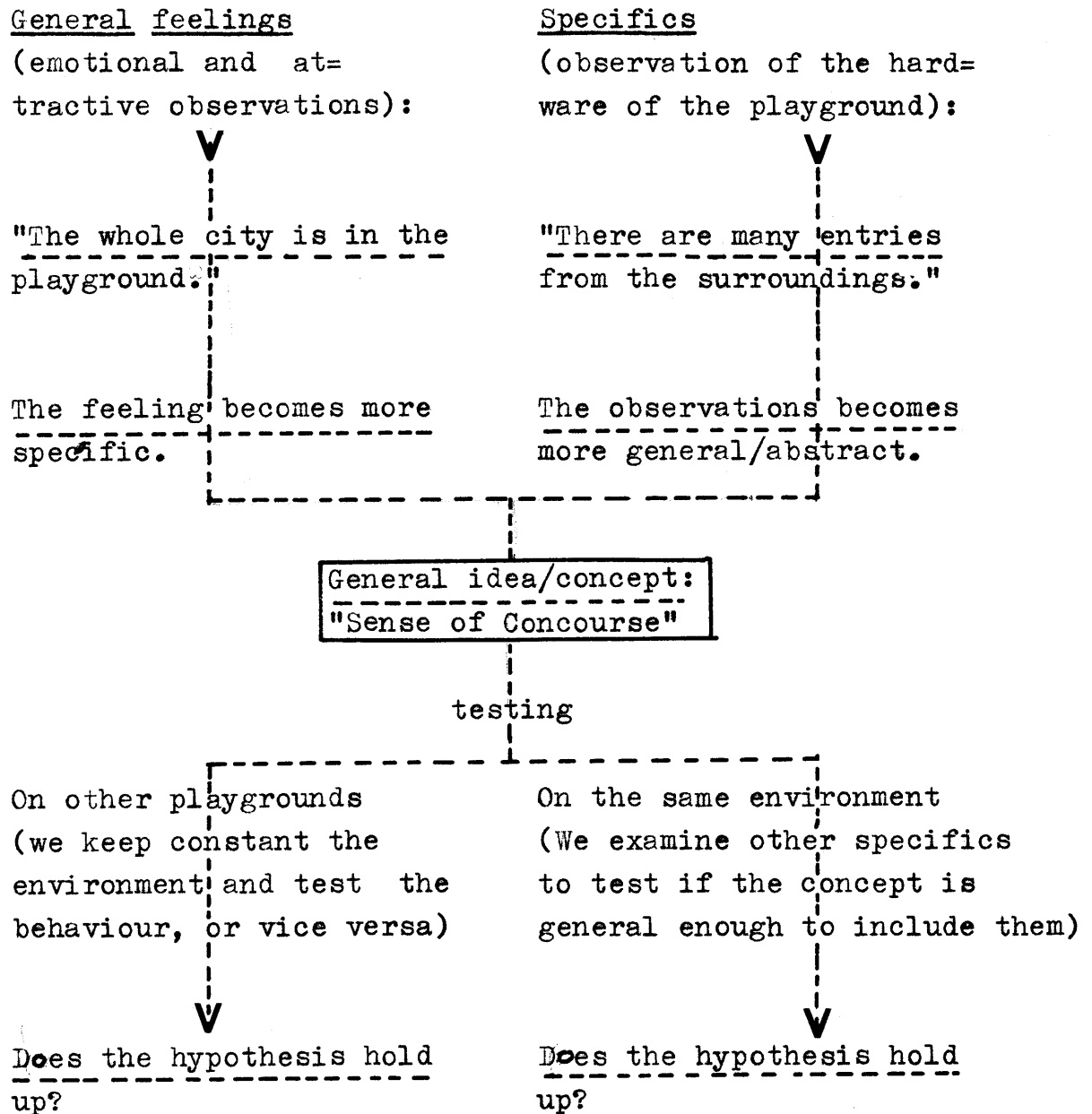
However, a rational way of comparing the new environments to Playground No. 4 seemed hard to find. The clue was found thanks to long conversations with my advisor, William A. Southworth. I formulated an idea/concept of mine which related certain aspects of the physical environment (first part of the statement) to certain behavior(s) (second part of the statement). One of the initial statements was: "A playground with inputs from many environments and with many places to play, sit, get privacy and develop social contact (first part, provides the players with a sense of concourse (concept/idea); i.e. the place becomes the center of a spontaneous gathering

of people and the players act in a natural and relaxed way (second part)." This statement became a hypothesis.

One way of testing the general hypothesis consisted in looking at the various specifics of Playground No. 4 and testing to determine if the concept/idea was general enough to include them. Another way consisted in testing the hypothesis on other playgrounds. For instance, I could find a playground with similar boundaries and test to determine if the second part of the statement held up -- and what the major modifications were. Conversely, I could find a playground where the players had a similar behavior and test to determine if the first part of the statement held up -- and what the major modifications were.

The diagram below shows in detail the process through which I formulated a hypothesis. I moved from two different points of view: some general feelings, and observations of specific physical aspects. On the one hand I formulated the feeling in a more specific way. On the other hand I formulated the specifics in a more general way. I repeated this process until I was able to find a concept which included both of them.

Diagram 2 : formulation of the general hypothesis
Sense of Concourse.



Part II:

Statement of my hypotheses

This part includes the statement of the General Hypothesis about playgrounds (Section A) and the statement of the Minor Supportive Hypotheses (Section A,1). The above hypotheses will be tested in the following Part III. The second section of this part (Section B) includes the statement of other non-tested General Hypotheses about playgrounds.

The General Hypotheses are accompanied by an analog, in the form of an example of another situation which could help communicate the concept expressed in the hypothesis to the reader.

A. General hypothesis: Sense of Concourse

A playground with inputs from many environments and with many places to play, sit, get privacy and develop social contact provides the players with a sense of concourse; i.e., the place becomes the center of a spontaneous gathering of people and the players act in a natural and relaxed way.

An analog might be: a concourse was the center of the village, the piazza or the pedestrian mall where people gathered in the evening in the happy, old, bygone times. The piazza gathering evokes memories of people sitting, walking and chatting with groups of friends in a relaxed and natural way. The scene seems to me similar in many ways to the way the kids played and mingled in Playground No. 4

1. Minor supportive hypotheses.

This part includes the further break down of the above General Hypothesis, Sense of Concourse. The hypothesis has been further divided into the following Minor Supportive Hypotheses:

a) Entries: a playground with easy, handy and manageable liasons between the off-playground living environment of the players and the in-playground environment provides them with the feeling that there is a continuity between the two environments and that the in-playground environment is a meeting center.

b) Facilities: a playground with unique, good facilities attended by players coming from many neighborhoods, provides the players with the attitude of mixing among themselves.

c) Places for contact/privacy: a playground which provides identifiable places where the players can have privacy or social contacts provides them with the feeling of self-assurance in themselves and in their relationships.

d) Places to sit, watch,...: a playground which provides areas to observe other people and activities before making any choices (places to sit-wait-watch-chat and choose) helps the players to move into action in a slow, natural and relaxed way.

B. Other General Hypotheses.

1. General Hypothesis, Sense of freedom: a playground not located in the home neighborhood of the players provides them with a sense of freedom and stimulates their interest for persons and things as well as their sense of initiative.

An analog might be the following case history: a few months ago I happened to see a group of teen-agers playing in the Piazza San Marco in Rome, a small public garden located on a busy traffic intersection. I was attracted by the contrast between the formality of the place with its hectic atmosphere of traffic and pedestrians and the informality and casualness of the children who played there. I said to myself: "What a funny place to play!" The interview which I had with those kids revealed the following:

1. Very infrequently they went to play in Piazza San Marco garden.

2. The place was unusual for them because of the shape of the site (formal, neat and all marble).

3. They "felt free" in that place because it was so different from the other environments where they met and played: neighborhood, school and play areas.

4. In that place they felt like doing things that elsewhere they wouldn't do, i.e., have new games/ activities among themselves (cluster all together on the steps, play blindman's buff) and get together with other kids ("I wouldn't talk to other kids on the bus to school," one of them told me).

2. General hypothesis, Do-it-yourself: a do-it-yourself

playground, i.e., a playground largely manipulated and adapted by the players, which stimulates a familiarity with the environment and develops their sense of competence as makers and players.

3. General Hypothesis, a place to interact with: a play-

ground whose physical settings require particular skills stimulates the involvement of the players with their play environment.

An analog might be the rehearsal barn at the O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut. The barn was used as a rehearsal hall for actor-students. The hall was a restricted space adapted for various purposes. There were many places, levels and structures. It worked successfully as a rehearsal hall because it required knowledge and experience to be used and this helped the students to perform better roles and activities. My understanding of this aspect was partially helped by a conversation which I had had with a teacher at the center. "Well, it (the barn) is a good place for a lot of reasons. It is the only big room we have. The rehearsal hall is right there, we dance there, tumble there, we do everything in the same room and you get to know that room very, very well. What the limitations of the room are exactly. Just what you can do to make the best use of it..."

Part III:

Testing

This part is concerned with the testing of one general hypothesis, Sense of Concourse, and the four minor supportive hypotheses into which the general hypothesis has been further broken down.

The statement of the general hypothesis is:

A playground with inputs from many environments and with many places to play, sit, get privacy and develop social contact (first part of the statement concerning the environment) provides the players with a sense of concourse (concept/idea); i.e., the place becomes the center of a spontaneous gathering of people and the players act in a natural and relaxed way (second part of the statement concerning the behavior.)

A. Preliminary testing: Playground No. 4

This part contains the preliminary testing on Playground No. 4 of the general hypothesis Sense of Concourse. In order to do this I considered the four minor hypotheses (see above p.70) and tested them to determine if they were consistent with my information about Playground No. 4. I used as a testing material the observations of the environment (specifics/use) and the observations of the kids' behavior and the results of the interviews. (observations and interviews). It can be seen from the following that the hypotheses were supported by this preliminary testing.

Minor hypothesis a) entries:

Specifics/use: Playground No. 4 has three entries (Briggs Place and Bradford and Groton Streets) which connect the surroundings to the play areas. They allow the various groups of players to move easily in and out without conflicting with other groups of players.

Observ.s/interviews: the kids like to play in the total environment (playground and surroundings) and like the playground because it provides contact and interaction with a varied population. Yet the Headquarters is a main meeting place.

Minor hypothesis b) facilities:

Specifics/use: the swimming pool, the basketball courts and the hockey field in the school yard are the best/unique facilities in the South End. Here there are teams of players who come from other neighborhoods to play championships.

Observ.s/interviews: the kids mix easily with the visiting teams. They like the playground because it has many and good courts for basketball and

hockey and this is a good opportunity for making teams and contests.

Minor hypothesis c) places for contact/privacy:

Specifics/use: places for privacy are the Headquarters, the small yard, and the stoops of the Mingle Club House. Places for contact are the sidelines around the street court and the yard. Here the crowdedness and the busy atmosphere compell the kids to get together.

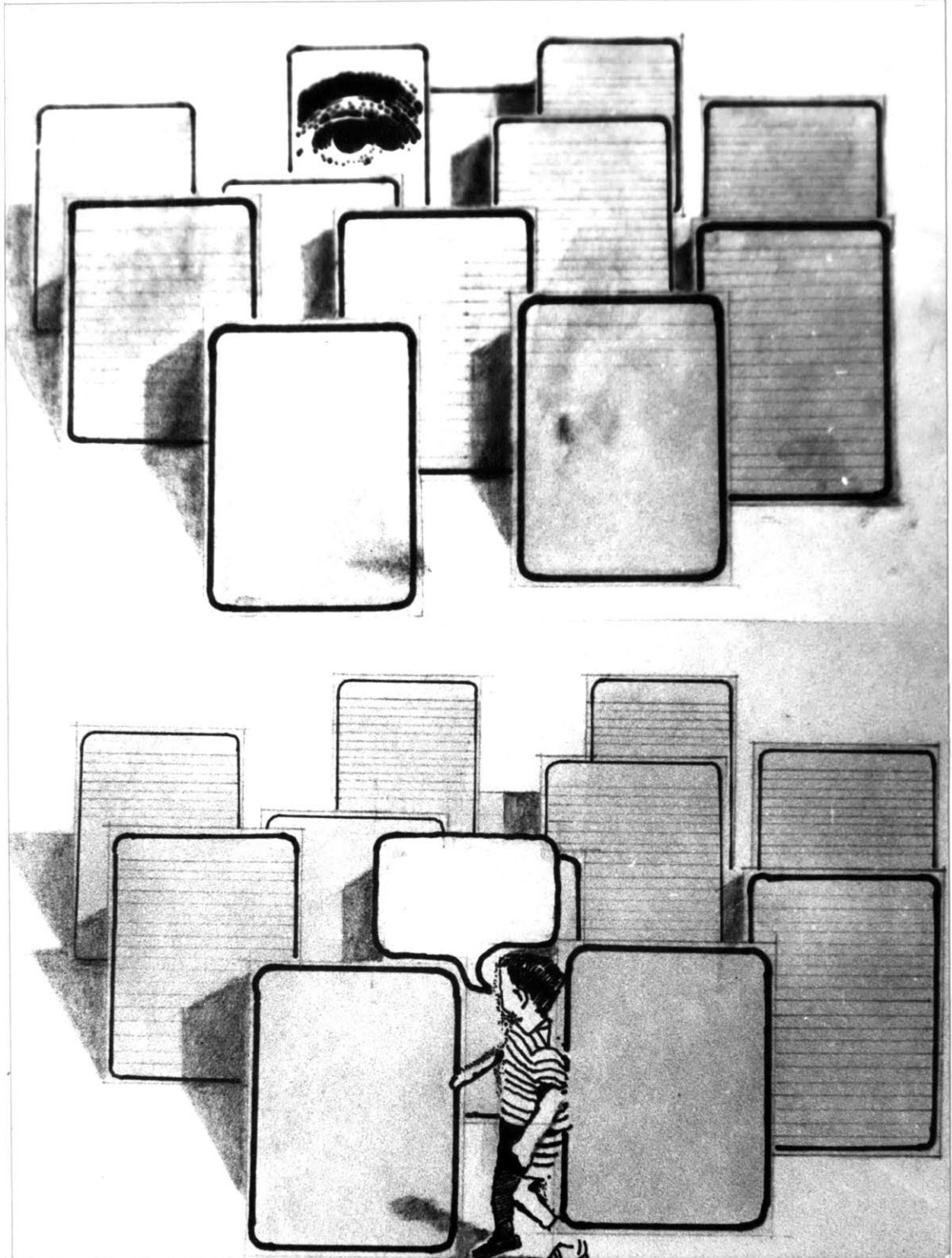
Observ.s/interviews: the kids are able to easily find privacy or contact with other players. Their behavior expresses self-assurance as if they can establish the kind of relationship they prefer with the other players.

Minor hypothesis d) places to sit, watch,....:

Specifics/use: there are two areas where the newly arrived players loll about to see "what is going on": Briggs Place and the sandy area (only the kids who are habitues of the playground attend these parts); and Groton Street and the street court, which are frequented by everybody.

Observ.s/interviews: a typical behavioral pattern of the players is: drop in the playground, loll about in the crossing alleys and in the sidelines of the play areas, sit down, watch and chat, get interested in games, get up, play,...

B. Method used for further testing



In order to test the general hypotheses Sense of Concourse on other play environments, I used the general statement as a criterion to find the testing cases. Was the behaviour of the kids relaxed and spontaneous as described in the second part of the statement? or did the environment have many entries, a variety of settings and places to have privacy or to develop contact as described in the first part of the statement?

Once I found the two study cases--the piazza of Cretone, a small village near Rome, and Mount Pleasant Street in Roxbury--I developed a list of things to observe and questions to ask in order to test the minor hypotheses (a), (b), (c), and (d). My observations were limited to the specifics considered in each hypothesis, i.e., entries; facilities; places for contact/privacy; and places to sit, watch....

Secondly, I developed a questionnaire to use in interviewing the kids about aspects of their play behaviour/environment which were related to the above observations. I used a focused interview technique¹, although most of my questions had been predefined and arranged in a sequence so that my interviewing was very close to a standardized interview². The reason for this was to make the new information comparable from case to case and to the hypotheses which I had to test.

(1) Maccoby and Maccoby, op. cit., p. 58.

(2) Ibid. "By standardized interview we mean one in which the questions have been designed upon in advance of the interview, and are asked with the same wording, and in the same order for all respondents."

C. Second testing: Cretone, study case.

Cretone is a small village 30 miles north of Rome. The center of the social life of the villagers, the Cretonesi, is the piazza. This is an open public space with two coffeehouses where the villagers gather at the end of the day.

The piazza is also the playground of the youths. They play soccer and other games in the open area and gather in the recreation room of one of the coffeehouses. Here they play billiards, listen to music and engage in conversation. The gathering in the piazza of the villagers, both youths and adults, gives the impression of a friendly and casual community life. You can see circles of adults discussing or playing cards in the open, adolescents clustering in various parts and still other kids playing soccer.

The behaviour of the kids at play in the piazza seemed to have strong similarities to the kind of behaviour which I depicted in the hypothesis I wanted to test, Sense of Concourse. This seemed to me a sufficient reason to choose the piazza as a testing case.

This case study is developed through the following steps:

First step: Observations of the kids at play in order to answer the question, "Is their behaviour similar to the description provided in the general hypothesis?"

Second step: Observations of the physical environment and interviews with the kids in order to get comments, if necessary, about the above observations.

Third step: findings ("is the hypothesis valid?"), and conclusions.

I. Observations and interviews

The initial observations of the kids at play in the piazza revealed that their behaviour was spontaneous, natural and relaxed as described in the general hypothesis. They used to gather in the piazza early in the afternoon without any apparent specific purpose. Here they formed groups and started chatting and strolling along. The conversation was usually the prelude for other activities such as soccer, games in the recreation room, or group games in the outdoor space. The activities were improvised depending on a variety of circumstances such as the crowdedness of the piazza or the prevailing interests of the kids.

After making the above observations about the behaviour of the players I next looked at the specific aspects of the physical environment. With reference to the four minor hypotheses, I found:

The piazza was in the center of a broader play environment which included some alleys and the passeggiata, a large mall where the kids went to walk. The piazza, because of its location, was the main gathering place of the kids of the village.

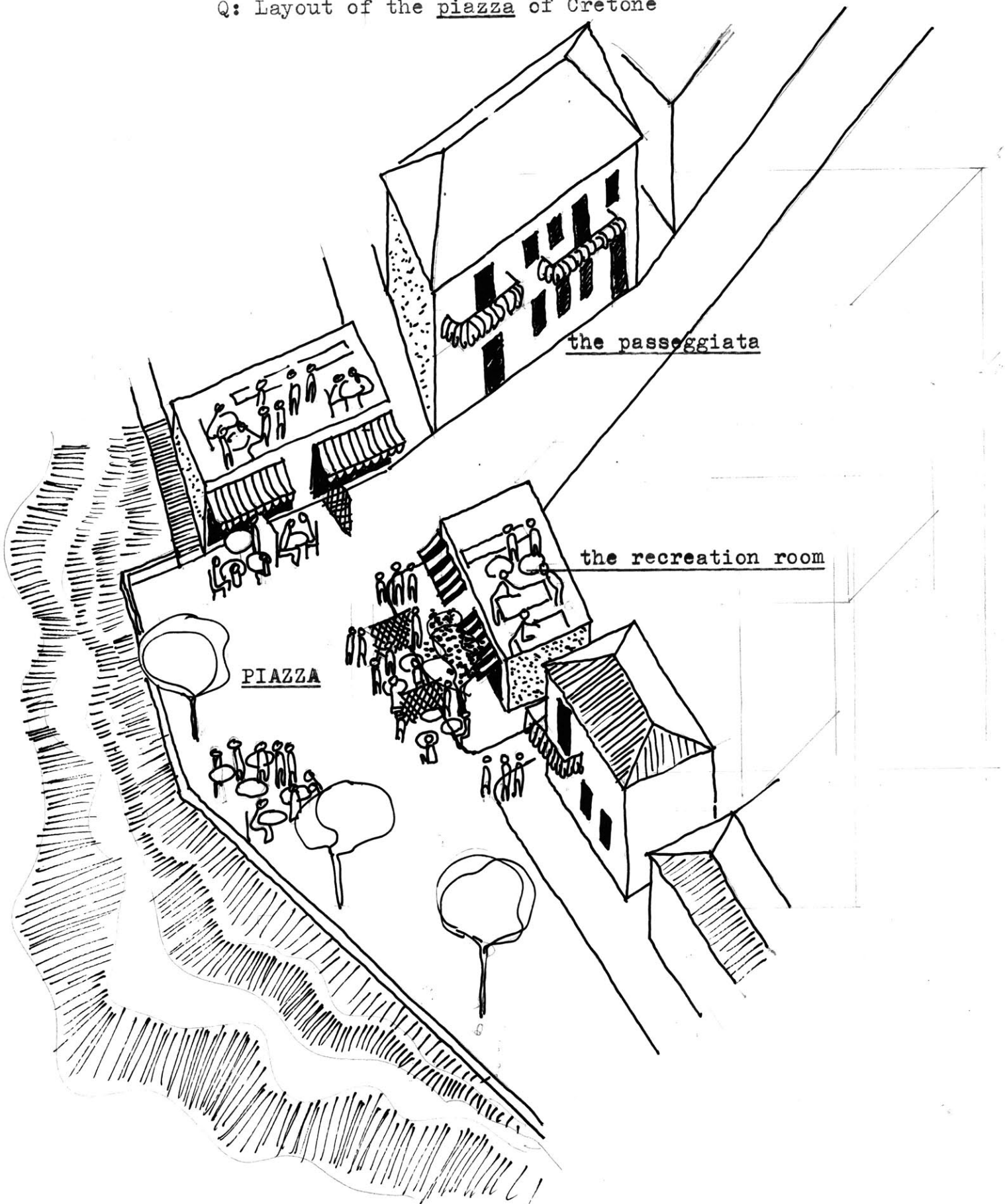
The recreation room was the only place where the kids could play indoors. Here they were more extroverted than elsewhere and interchanged very easily. This aspect was better illustrated by comments. The room, they said, was the only place to play billiards and cards and also it gave them an opportunity to get together with other players.

The recreation room provided some secluded parts (near the juke box and the outdoor espalliers) next to the more communal play

areas. In this room the sense of self-assurance of the kids seemed most evident. Here they were versatile in developing relationships with other players. When the piazza was crowded, the kids said, they had the same feeling as in the recreation room. Amidst the crowds of players, there were more opportunities for developing games and relationships or even enjoying privacy.

The piazza provided the kids with a variety of places to sit--the outdoor seats of the coffeehouses and some low walls. Since they were located next to the play areas, they provided good opportunities for watching games and participating.

Q: Layout of the piazza of Cretone





R Cretone, the Piazza



S Cretone, the recreation room

2. Findings and stylized model

The result of the above testing seemed to be that the general hypothesis was still valid. The piazza of Cretone had to a large extent the attributes which I described in my general hypothesis; therefore, both the first and the second part of the statement were standing.

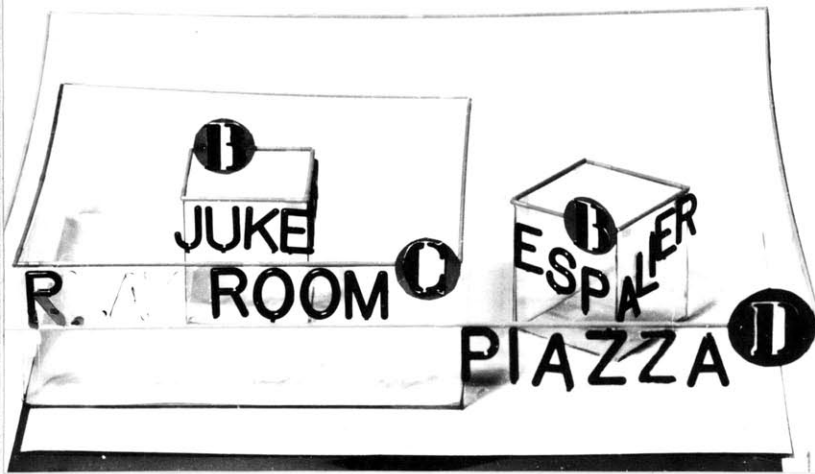
From the study of this case I derived some general conclusions on the design of the physical environment. This seemed to be divided into three main areas:

The piazza--this was a play environment used by everybody and adapted to a variety of uses.

The recreation room--a place used by a specific group (the teen-agers) and used for specific activities.

The niches (the juke box and the espalliers), isolated places adapted for privacy.

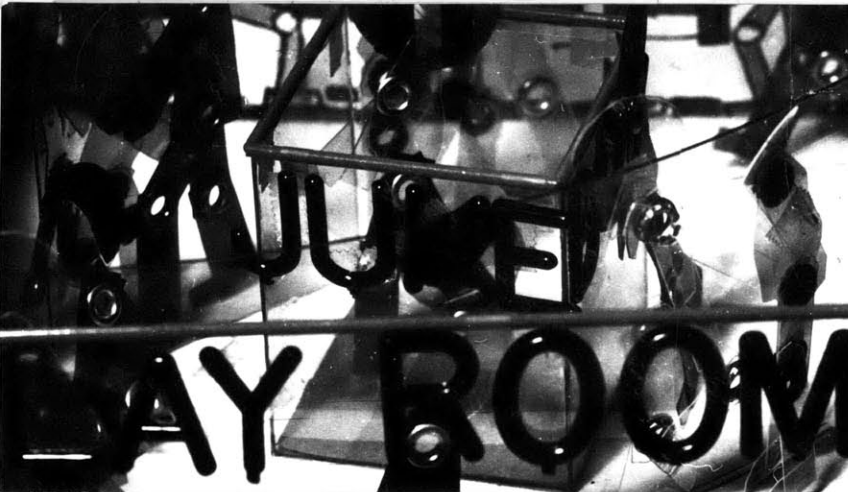
The recreation room appeared to be the center or core of the total play environment. This happened because it provided opportunities (such as billiards or other games) for mixing with other players and was the place where the kids used to meet to start their play-day. I elaborated on these conclusions graphically by means of a diorama, a three-dimensional stylized model. It reproduces the three parts of the environment and indicates the relationships/activities which take place in each part.



The three environments earlier defined: the piazza, the recreation room and the private places (juke box and espalliers).



The recreation room is the meeting center of the youths



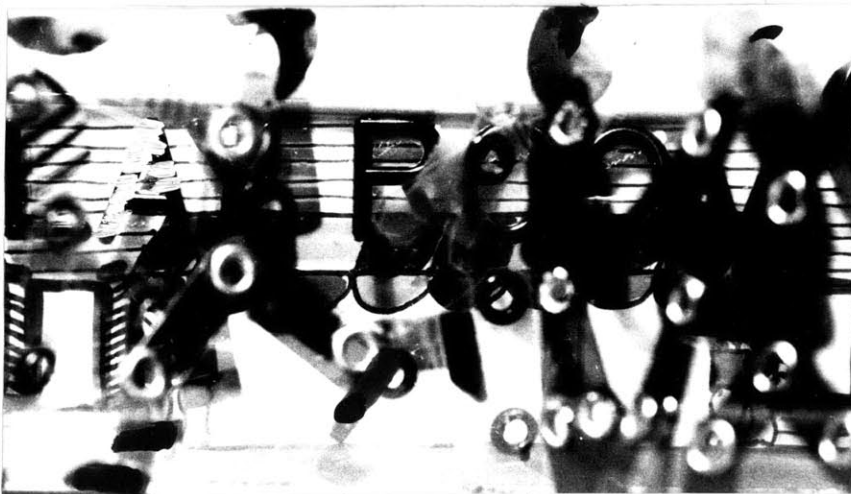
The place becomes crowded and this helps the youths to develop relationships



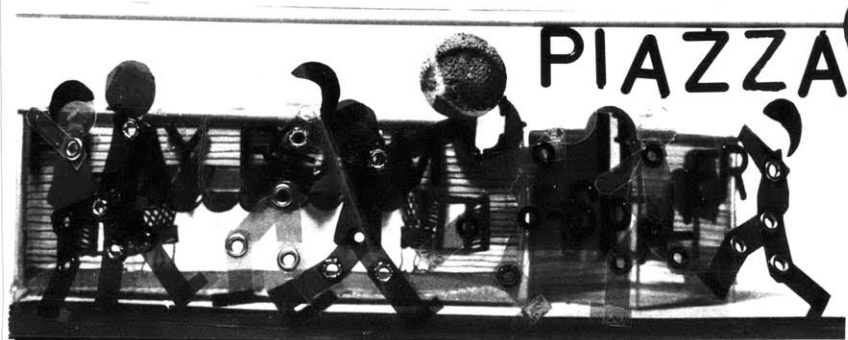
The juke box is a private place to loll about, watch, dream... The attention of the kids around is attracted by the games.



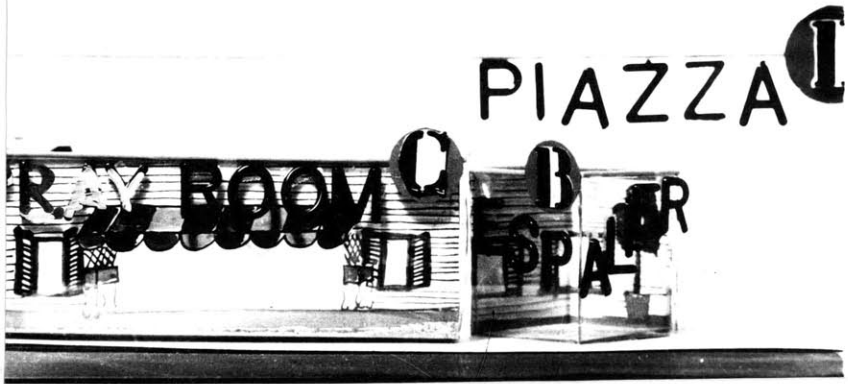
The espalliers provide some privacy. They are similar to the juke box



Before the youths were shy and isolated in small groups. Soccer is an opportunity to get together...



Soccer gets started.



The outdoors environment

D. Third testing: Mount Pleasant Street, case study.

The play area considered in this second case comprises a playground located on one side of Mount Pleasant Street in Roxbury, a back place on the opposite side, and the street itself.

The playground contains typical equipment such as sand boxes, merry-go-round and monkey bars. The street is used for a variety of games such as football, cart pulling and flying paper planes. The back place provides a basketball hoop and a large area where the children play darts, tag or hide-and-go-seek.

I found this playground while searching for an environment where I could test my general hypothesis. In particular, the back place seemed to have strong similarities to the kind of environment which I depicted in the hypothesis I wanted to test. It seemed to be the center of a broader play environment and seemed adaptable to a variety of activities.

This case study is developed through the following steps:

First step: Observation of the physical environment in order to answer the question, "Is it similar to the description provided in the general hypothesis?"

Second step: Observation of the behaviour of the kids at play and interview with them in order to get comments, if necessary, about the above observations.

Third step: findings ("Is the hypothesis still valid?"), and conclusions.

I. Observations and Interviews

Initial observations of the back lot provided me with the following information about the physical environment.

The area was at the center of a broader play environment. This included the driveway connecting the lot to Mount Pleasant Street and some porches, balconies of a four-floor building which defined one border of the back place. The kids used to climb up the porches and used the various levels as play areas.

Various parts of the back place were secluded and isolated from the surroundings. There were the steps of the porches, some abandoned cars, and the basement of the porches, where the kids had made a secret club house.

Finally, the lot provided various places to sit and watch: the wall, in front of the hoop, and Mrs. Johnson's steps, a stoop in front of the driveway.

From the observation of the kids I learned that the back place was the main gathering place of a group of children and teenagers. They seemed to be familiar with the place and their behavior was natural and relaxed. I developed the testing further by interviewing two kids of this group, Dorve and Denise, a boy and a girl both 12 years old. From the interview, with reference to the four minor hypotheses, I learned the following things:

That they spent most of their time in the back place because it was the center of the various settings where they played: the

street, the porches, and the abandoned cars.

The back place was the only area to play basketball and was particularly good for playing darts and kick the ball. These games were an opportunity to mix with other players, who came from the street to join into them.

The secluded parts (abandoned cars, and the steps of the porches) were places used to develop relationships with a few close friends.

The sitting places (the stoop and the wall) were like bleachers because they provided a good view of the basketball games and the street activities.



V: Mount Pleasant Street



W: Mount Pleasant Street, the driveway



X: Mount Pleasant Street, the back place

2. Findings

After I performed this second test the initial hypothesis seemed to me still valid. The kids at play in the back place acted in a manner which was close to the behavior described in the second part of the general hypothesis, therefore both the first and the second part of the statement were standing.

From the study of this case I derived some general conclusions about the design of this environment. It presented strong similarities to what I had already found in the piazza of Cretone. Also this environment seemed divided into three main areas:

The street and the playground. This was an environment similar to the piazza of Cretone, used by everybody for a variety of purposes.

The back lot. This environment presented analogies with the recreation room of Cretone. It was a place predominantly used by Dorve, Denise and their close friends for gathering or playing some special games such as darts.

The abandoned cars and the balconies which were isolated and private places similar to the espalliers in the Cretone case.

Finally, to make the analogy stronger, I found that the back place was the center or the core of the total play environment. In this place the behavior of the kids was the most spontaneous and natural, as if it provided them with the best opportunities for developing relationships among themselves and making games.

Part IV:

Summary

The first part of this report is a comparative study of four playgrounds located along Shawmut Avenue in Boston. There I derived my initial insights into the interaction between the behavior of the players and their play environment. The four cases I was dealing with were a specifically designed playground and an adjoining vacant lot also used as a play area; a treehouse made out of posts, boards and ropes; a formal concrete playground; and a playground partially adapted by the kids and mixed with parts of the city. Each environment seemed to produce a different way of playing. For instance, there were children making games inspired by the junk; children undertaking role plays (such as actors or monkeys); forming athletic teams; and, in general, showing versatility in the use of the environment.

A major distinction seemed to be that some environments were rigid, made of solid, unchangeable material with designated areas for specific activities; while other environments were flexible and provided more possibilities for changing the environment and making different games/activities.

This second kind of environment was particularly evident in the last playground, Playground No. 4. Thus I decided to focus on this case study. The study of Playground No. 4 led to the utilization of the concept of "family" as applied to the group of kids who established their territory in this playground. Because of its soft nature they were able to change the environment itself, to make it fit their needs. Most of their work was intended to provide a comfortable place to meet, mingle privately, take care of each other, or hide themselves. The over-riding wish/dream

of the group was to build a small hut, a place where they could best develop their group relationships.

The discovery of the family is a major point of this study. The observation of the games of the group in the Headquarters provided me with a new image of play, something closer to play and work, play and affection than a past-time. The observation of the family also served my purpose of investigating the relationships between kids and the play environment: the flexible environment which I had initially observed seems to lead to the formation of a family-like group of players.

What I learned is examined further and expressed in the form of four general hypotheses: general concepts/ideas about playgrounds which assume an interaction between the players and the play environment itself.

Finally, Part III of the study is dedicated to the testing of the first of the hypotheses, a Sense of Concourse. The testing is done with two study cases: Cretone, a small village near Rome; and a play environment located in Mount Pleasant Street in Roxbury. The hypothesis assumes that a playground with some of the attributes which I found in Playground No. 4 (particularly the abundance of entries, places for privacy and contact) provides the players with a sense of concourse, that there is a place to go to find people and to do things. They join into activity in a spontaneous, natural and relaxed way.

The result of the testing was that the hypothesis held up; the type of physical environment above described encourages the kids to develop games and relationships with a sense of friendship and spontaneity, pretty

much as the kids of Playground No. 4 used to do.

Part V:

Conclusions and implications

This study brought me to the conclusion that there is a gap between what architects think about play and what kids do. Many environments which architects designed for play are abandoned wastelands: at the same time we see kids in the streets, at a busy corner, or in a junk yard joyously involved in play. This study allowed me partially to understand the why's of this.

The kind of play environment which seems to appeal to kids provides them with the possibility of adapting and changing parts of it; it has secluded private parts where the kids can secret themselves and get engrossed in their conversations; it is located in a neighborhood rich in contacts with activities of the city at large. The city life in fact seems to bring values which are essential to play: challenge, mystery, evasion, contact, and inspirations.

The above rules are not usually followed by designers. How many playgrounds allow the kids to relax all together--boys, girls and children on a private and clean piece of grassy area? How many playgrounds allow the kids to move quickly from their hide-outs to busy and crowded portions of the neighborhood? Very few do.

Through observations about play behavior and the requirements of such behavior at Playground No. 4 and other environments such as Mount Pleasant Street and the Piazza in Cretone I learned that the magic of a play environment is expressed by places which assume for the kids a special value: the Headquarters, the back place and the recreation room in these three environments are such places. They were good hangouts, good places to sit and talk, good places for contact and they became the center of the

total play environment. Discovery of such a place seems to me essential to understand the logic of a playground. Here most activities are started and develop. Here players build community.

These observations have implications for the designers. A playground by itself may not generate a community of players. But a community of players may develop with some design help.

The initial work of the designer should be to hang around with kids, learn from them about play, and promote their responses. Finally, he should get answers to the crucial question: what shall we do to build/change/improve the playground?

Within the limitations of this study I came close enough to a group of kids, the family of Playground No. 4, to get this kind of response from them. They wanted to build the "small hut" which was the place for the group and knew exactly how to improve the Headquarters. The only regret I have in this study is that I was unable to help them carry their proposals through to completion.

This research changed substantially my attitude toward design. I explored how useful it is to listen to the users--kids or anybody who is going to use the designed product. The method which I have acquired by hanging around, talking with kids and observing them seems to me full of implications in the design of play environments, i.e., it seems to me a fruitful way of gathering information about what the designer should do and how.